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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
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INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000314

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2017

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SUBJECT: CODEL PELOSI MEETS WITH AMBASSADOR, IRAQI PRESIDENT

Classified By: Ambassador Khalilzad, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Meeting with the Ambassador before a luncheon with Iraqi President Talabani, and at the luncheon, CODEL Pelosi members expressed concern that Iraqi PM Maliki had not proposed and did not support a U.S. troop surge. They also expressed doubts about the GOI's political will to make the changes necessary for national reconciliation. The Ambassador and Iraqi National Security Advisor Rubaie explained that the Baghdad security plan (BSP) incorporated PM Maliki's principles. The Ambassador and the GOI lunch guests agreed that Iraq needed to show more will to make tough political decisions. End Summary.

Concerns About U.S. Troop Surge

¶2. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador before the luncheon, Speaker Pelosi introduced her delegation. Rep. Lantos noted that there has been a sea change in U.S. public opinion. Rep. Lantos called the idea of a U.S. troop surge disturbing. Lantos said Iraqi PM Maliki wanted fewer U.S. troops in Baghdad; the surge should be done by Iraqis, who are culturally and linguistically better prepared. He asked how success is defined in this situation. Lantos said U.S. public and Congressional opinion was for de-escalation, not escalation.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador replied that reducing and ultimately controlling sectarian violence in Baghdad would be the most important measure of success. The PM wanted to have Iraqi lead in Baghdad. This is what the plan does. He wants military commanders to decide what forces were needed to secure the city. The PM had indeed originally envisioned Iraqi security forces (ISF) would be in charge of Baghdad, but in the course of joint military talks it became clear the ISF did not have enough troops for the task. The Ambassador told the group he has made clear to GOI leaders that U.S. assistance is based on GOI performance and is not open-ended.

Doubts About Iraqi Political Will

¶4. (C) Rep. Lowey asked whether and when PM Maliki endorsed the new Baghdad Security Plan (BSP) and asked for an update on GOI reconciliation efforts. Speaker Pelosi noted the importance to reconciliation of amending the Constitution and asked why it has not yet happened.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador noted that the PM endorsed BSP in his January 6 Armed Forces Day speech and also in a January 25 speech at Iraq's Council of Representatives (CoR). On reconciliation, the GOI had agreed to a number of steps but frankly, the Ambassador added, had not progressed as much as on the security front. GOI leaders are not moving quickly enough to make necessary compromises; however, there had been a marked change for the better in recent weeks.

¶6. (C) Rep. Skelton asked whether Iraqis realize U.S. patience has run out. The Ambassador replied that Iraqis generally had a different sense of time than the U.S., many had sectarian, parochial agendas, and the nation-building task ahead of Iraq is enormous. Rep. Lantos worried that the idea of a single Iraqi nation may not be in consonance with Iraq's history. Rep. Lowey asked whether Iraqis wanted to divide the country into Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish regions, and whether Shiites wanted to accommodate Sunnis or kill them.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador replied that most Iraqi Arabs do not favor division; there is some sentiment for division among Kurds. The sources of sectarian strife are nostalgia for the past by some Sunnis, and the desire by some Shiites for revenge.

The Possibility of Regional Diplomacy

¶8. (C) Rep. Hobson noted the importance of regional talks to solving Iraq's problems. The Ambassador agreed; U.S. policy is to let the GOI take the lead in regional diplomacy. Speaker Pelosi worried that the GOI is not strong enough to effectively engage its neighbors.

Questioning GOI Leaders About Surge

¶9. (C) At the luncheon, Speaker Pelosi introduced the delegation to President Talabani. Talabani welcomed the

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delegation and thanked the U.S. for bringing democracy to Iraq. He told the delegation that the Mahdi Army (JAM) had just agreed to cease fighting in Baghdad.

¶10. (C) Rep. Hobson detailed U.S. public concern over whether the ISF are capable of assuming security responsibilities. U.S. troops should not be knocking on doors in Baghdad; the ISF should. The U.S. wants Iraq to succeed in this. Rep. Murtha said that U.S. patience has been sorely tested; U.S. military capability is strained. PM Maliki's original plan to put Iraqi troops in Baghdad would be preferable to a U.S. troop surge. The U.S. wants Iraq to succeed, but a U.S. surge is not the way to ensure that success. Rep. Lowey said she understood the PM's initial plan was to clear U.S. troops out of Baghdad; ISF were better suited to operations in an Iraqi city.

¶11. (C) Iraqi National Security adviser Rubaie replied that the present BSP incorporated the principles PM Maliki proposed to President Bush in Amman. The idea is that the U.S. will accelerate handover the security responsibilities to the ISF and authority over security matters to the GOI. Commanders would then decide on local security requirements. Rubaie asked for "strategic patience"; this would not necessarily synchronize with the U.S. election cycle. A U.S. pullout would look like defeat.

¶12. (C) Rep. Skelton said that U.S. troops are stretched and the U.S. has other military commitments aside from Iraq. The U.S. will be Iraq's long-term strategic ally, but a surge damages U.S. military readiness.

¶13. (C) President Talabani said the ISF wants more responsibility for security. The ISF are ready to move to the front on security and take the casualties. In addition, Iraq needs to move forward on reconciliation and relations with its neighbors. The GOI has made mistakes and Ministry of Defense corruption is a problem. Sunnis and Shiites mistrust each other. However, Talabani hoped bipartisan support for Iraq would continue and that Iraq and the U.S.

would move toward a long-term strategic relationship.

...And About Reconciliation

¶14. (C) Rep. Lowey asked Talabani about reconciliation, noting that sectarian killings are increasing and many Iraqis were leaving the country. She asked whether Iraq needs to bring back a strong leader and strong military. President Talabani described how destructive the Saddam regime had been for Iraq. The present sectarian violence is between "gangs" but does not represent the feelings of most of Iraqi society. Taking democracy away from Iraq again would be unacceptable to Sunnis and Shiites alike.

¶15. (C) Speaker Pelosi expressed admiration for President Talabani's optimism but said the reality is different. U.S. public opinion matters, she said, and the delegation is worried this message is not getting through to Iraqi leaders. The U.S. cannot sustain this war without end; only Iraqis could deal with a civil war. She underlined that the U.S. is committed to helping Iraq in fighting Al-Qaeda and the external terrorist threat, but should not be given the responsibility for ending the sectarian violence. Speaker Pelosi asked why the Iraqi Constitution had not yet been amended; this would send a strong signal that the GOI is keeping its promises. Talabani pointed out the CoR's Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) is formed and working; the Ambassador noted that the review process started late.

¶16. (C) Shiite Deputy CoR Speaker Khalid al-Attayah agreed the review process had started late, but was confident that it would help ease civil strife. He expressed optimism about the new BSP, which this time integrates political, economic and security measures.

¶17. (C) Sunni Deputy PM Zawbai called the BSP "a last opportunity for success." Thus far, Sunnis had not been included in the decision-making process, but Zawbai expressed optimism this would change.

¶18. (C) Kurdish DPM Salih told the group that Iraq's transition from dictatorship to democracy had been tougher than expected. There is no purely military solution, but decades of dictatorship had left Iraqi society polarized. He expressed understanding about U.S. frustration, but Iraq is at a crucial juncture. Iraq is not the cause of regional problems, but rather, a victim of them. Success will be difficult but possible if there is an Iraqi and American partnership. In that partnership, the U.S. has the legitimate right to hold Iraq to its commitments on reconciliation, anti-corruption and human rights.

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¶19. (U) CODEL Pelosi did not clear this cable.
SPECKHARD